

Running head: Able to adapt and conquer

“Able” to adapt and conquer

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Abstract

During Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) VII and VIII, Able Troop 3-71 Cavalry operated as the brigade rapid mounted reaction force throughout Regional Command East (RC-E) and South in Afghanistan. This tells of how our unit moved in-between Regional Commands to deter and destroy the enemy, set up multiple Combat Out Posts (COP), trained Afghanistan National Police (ANP), dealt with the first extension and set the stages in the North for follow on forces.

“Able” to adapt and conquer

The heart of a Cavalry ground unit consists of 66 men, 18 vehicles, and a magnitude of light and heavy weapons but these are only the logistics. In February 2006, I worked with and saw this heart beat strongly as it endured and conquered terrain, weather and the enemy to become a troop worthy of its’ “Able” name.

February of 2006 brought the deployment of the 71st Cavalry, 3rd Squadron, “Able” Troop from a blistering winter in Fort Drum, New York. Our squadron left negative twenty-degree wind chills and an elevation of 1600 feet to land in seventy-degree temperatures at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Salerno, which sits at 5,000-foot elevation. This drastic change brought an immediate need to acclimatize and begin our training on the terrain that we would operate on throughout our tour. We would soon begin our missions in this war torn country and realize all too soon the toll the terrain would take on our equipment, our bodies, and our minds.

Soon after landing, we drew and prepared our equipment while preparing for the Ground Assault Convoy (GAC). This GAC would take us 400 miles to the Northern most camp in Afghanistan and would allow us to determine if the roads in this mountainous terrain could support the squadrons’ military traffic. A mounted maneuver of this caliber had not been attempted before our squadron came through. The movement started with

plans for three days and 30 vehicles to travel over trenced out dirt roads with Remain Overnights (RON) at Jalabad airfield. The road conditions took a heavy toll on our ancient vehicles and caused us to spend an extra night in Kabul where the hospitality of the National Guard unit stationed there amazed us and thankfully, they repaired our vehicles so that we could continue on our mission. After returning our vehicles to 100%, we continued from Kabul to Jalabad on some of the most dangerous switchbacks in the region. Though the views were picturesque, each bend of the road offered thousand foot drop offs and was littered with vehicles that fell to their demise with the collapsing roads. We continued through this treacherous terrain to our destination in Jalabad where we linked up with a small portion of our Squadron Tactical Command Post (TAC). Once again, our vehicles underwent needed maintenance while the leaders received intelligence briefings and last minute guidance for our departure.

The movement to our first refuel point in Asabad met with no issues; we arrived there within four hours after leaving Jalabad. Upon completing the refuel of the vehicles, we tried to mentally prepare for the grueling leg ahead as we knew that it would be a long and dangerous process on these roads never traveled on by military traffic. We began our slow reconnaissance North through the mountains to the Camp of Naray. Points on this grueling route at times left half of the tires of our High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWV) dangling over 300 to 1,000 foot drops over raging rivers while the other half of our tires stayed on the dirt roads. We continued these monotonous and dangerous procedures over the next six hours until we finally reached the Naray camp occupied by a small Special Forces team.

We prepped for our first division operation named “Mountain lion,” a joint operation with the Marines operating out of Jalabad. We drew some brand new M114s with LRASS and M1151s before rolling out to our screening position. We were to provide a back stop on the ground interdiction with one platoon; the 2nd platoon was conducting long range reconnaissance from key high ground over watching border crossings while our third platoon was set up in ambush locations during the infantry battalions’ initial push into the mouth of the valleys.

We continued our surveillance for a few days when we received a FRAGO that we were being air inserted deep to collect intelligence and over watch NAIs while the infantry battalions pushed through the valleys. We returned back to our squadron Forward Logistical Element (FLE) and parked our vehicles in preparation of the dismounted mission. A Marine 81mm mortar team was attached to my Troop headquarters and together we would be inserted on a mountain- top that was vital for observation and for the control of the intersecting valleys. We loaded my headquarters, one platoon, and our mortar team into the back of the first CH-47 Chinook and flew deep into the valley to conduct a tailgate landing on the side of a mountain at 10,000 feet. We exited the hovering aircraft, sunk in three feet of snow, and started the human plow so others could exit the helicopter. After we had everyone off along with a 120-pound LRAS, 81mm mortar tube, a basic allocation of ammo, and three Days of Supplies (DOS), we started the tedious movement through armpit deep snow toward the crest of the mountain. When we reached our OP location we set up security, the mortar team dug down three feet to set the base plate, and we established Tactical satellite communication

with our higher headquarters for the start of our recon mission. Our second platoon was air inserted a few miles north of us to conduct visual and recon patrols. They were looking for caches and enemy strongholds throughout the Kunar valley. Our third platoon was set up in a back stop for the Marine battalion that was clearing the Chowkay valley.

We started conducting long-range recon patrols into the mountain villages looking for enemy sanctuaries and weapon caches. We inserted in with three DOS, our only means of resupply was by helicopter due to our positions in the mountains. The initial resupply plan was to be done every three days. The weather in the mountain passes, the extreme elevation and the high winds postponed the resupply missions to our Observation Points (OP) to every five if they could fly. Our missions continued even though we were black on all Class one items and had to use solar panels to recharge our batteries that powered the LRASS. This drastically hindered our long-range optics and our internal security to the point that we could only scan for a few hours during the night. We had to increase our local security patrols to counterbalance the loss of the majority of our optics. To counter balance the heavy swirling winds the aircrews were kicking out speedballs in duffle bags filled with bottled water and MREs. The downfall to this method was that the majority of the water broke upon impact against the protruding rocks. During the night, we had to place the bottles that survived in sleeping bags with soldiers so they would not freeze and bust. We continued with this method continuing over three weeks.

Once the Marines and Infantry battalions were in place and we had gathered enough intelligence on our Named Area of Interests (NAI) and villages we prepared for the final push. We retrograded our LRASS and mortar team to relocate with the Squadron

Headquarters, and started our dismounted movement to our new over watch to begin blocking positions. It took us two days to descend through the heavy snow and mountain terrain to move to our subsequent fighting positions located with the Squadron TAC. After linking up we conducted a hasty resupply and began our movement into our positions to support our battalions push into the key villages. The battalions moved through and cleared the villages of enemy fighters and multiple caches. Over the next few days, we provided the backstop to all of the exfiltration routes to prevent any escape from our clearing forces. After the battalions completed clearing they began to retrograde through the valleys to refit and reconsolidate while we remained in our positions to target the fighters that would try to return home from their hiding positions in the caves. We remained in position for an additional week and then moved to an extraction point. We sent one of our platoons to secure the extraction area and to give the impression that all US forces had left the area to once again lure the fighters out of caves. After conducting small unit operations throughout the week on returning fighters we started to displace and link up with our other platoon in the extraction area. After our linkup we reinforced their positions due to a storm front rolling through that delayed our extraction aircraft for an additional two days. When the weather started to break multiple Chinook lifts were sent to extract us off the mountain. We received word that our Squadron Commander was flying out on the last aircraft to supervise the last portion of the extraction due to it being a nighttime tailgate extraction. We split up our troop chain of command and sent the executive officer on the first aircraft to start coordination for our refit at Jalabad. The Commander flew on the second aircraft and I was on the next to last flight with the

remaining Headquarter personnel. Our 2nd platoon would be the last to extract on the aircraft with the Squadron Commander. The last Chinook started its extraction with three Soldiers jumping in the aircraft and had begun pulling the platoon equipment inside when one of the tail rotors struck the side of the mountain. The aircraft crashed down the side of the mountain and exploded around 1000 feet below the extraction point killing the four-man crew, three scouts and the Squadron Commander. The remainder of the platoon split their force between security and scrambled down to secure the aircraft while the escort AH-64 provided air support. We received word upon landing that our last aircraft crashed and a Marine Quick Reaction Force (QRF) had been launched to help secure the downed aircraft. The next few days the Soldiers on the ground searched and cleared the wreckage to retrieve our Soldiers remains and equipment. After extracting the final remains, the platoon was extracted to Jalabad to prepare our deceased for stateside return. We conducted our funeral and Ramp ceremony for our fallen and sent them on their Hero flights with platoon escorts stateside. We started our reconsolidation and refit in preparation for the next division operation to keep the troop occupied while they were still going through the grieving process of the recent catastrophe.

We were selected to set up a Combat Out Post (COP) in the Northeast Mountains of Nuristan where no other forces beside the Russians had ever been. It was at a critical location between the Kunar/Nuristan corridor from Pakistan and the North. The region in the Hindu Kush Mountains was thought to be the hiding location of the enemy upper echelons that were facilitating operations throughout the theater. A small detachment was air inserted to hold the ground that was to become our COP. Our troop was to

conduct a reconnaissance on the only dirt road that connected the Northern provinces for traffic ability and to see if it was usable. The movement started at daybreak and we started pushing our troop to the North and it was extremely slow due to the left side of the road being a 10,000 mountain and the right side was a drop off of 300 to 1000 feet into a raging river. We cleared the route and made hasty fixes when we could to ensure the road would support our vehicles and reported all sites that were in dire need to be fixed for any future operations. When we arrived at the COP site, we set our vehicles up in security to lock down the sectors of fire to reinforce the initial quartering party. The outpost area was at 6900 feet and butted up against 10,000 foot mountains giving enemy forces the initial advantage. We set up OP Warheight with a platoon to cover the Northern mountain face with an LRASS and a 120 mm mortar system to provide early warning. During the first week of setting the camp up it was attacked from three sides with heavy machine gun fire and over 30 RPGs. The firefight lasted over four hours with at least 13 of the RPGs landing inside our perimeter. On the enemies first volley we sustained two wounded soldiers with no real damage to the base itself. The TIC ended when multiple 500 lb. munitions were dropped on the enemy positions and rocked the camp from the concussion of the blasts. When the fighting finished we sent out patrols to check for Battle Damage Assessment (BDA) and 22 dead enemy fighters were found with multiple weapon systems. Over the next few days we were continuously hit by enemy fire and probing patrols to try to find a weak point to our defense but with no avail. At the end August we launched a week long dismounted mission to clear the north face mountain of caches, caves, and conduct HLZ reconnaissance for another possible OP. We had just

come from sea level and now we were zigzagging up and down from 8000-10,000 feet. The Headquarters and I went straight to the top of the mountain to clear and prepare a landing zone while the two other platoons destroyed caches, caves and previous enemy fortified positions. Over the week, our bodies took a beating as we acclimatized while mountain climbing. After we completed the North face, we started our two-day movement back to the camp to debrief our Squadron S-2 and some much needed rest.

We continued improving the camp and started conducting dismounted recon patrols and located numerous villages that were not on any maps. The only ground LOC was patrolled constantly to keep it from enemy control and to widen it to allow for military and Jingle vehicles. Throughout the fall, we constantly fought an enemy force almost daily and made great progress in removing the enemy from the populace with minimal wounded from our unit. The heavy volume of contact in our area forced us to only get aircraft resupply at nighttime when the illumination was over 75% and was weather dependant from their location an hour away at Bagram airfield. We had to always ration our food and water because we remained constantly in a black supply status. After four months of local nationals widening the road to facilitate jingle trucks, it was attempted and successful from FOB Naray. Our own convoys and Jingle trucks became our main elements of resupply but came under fire on each attempt. The 25-mile resupply route offered us as easy targets for the enemy with us only able to go forward or backward. The constant execution of refined battle drills and well disciplined soldiers allowed us to keep us operating during the low illumination periods. At the end of October a Jingle re-supply

was pushed to us with our sister troop along with escorting an LMTV full of supplies. They came into heavy contact and two jingle trucks were destroyed along with major damage to the LMTV. The destroyed Jingle trucks collapsed the road and fell burning into the river along with all of our supplies. The patrol limped the LMTV and their vehicles into our camp and we began attending to their wounded and damaged vehicles. The convoy returned back to FOB Naray the next morning but had to leave the Jingle trucks and LMTV because of replacement parts. The road at the two destroyed Jingle truck locations was just barely enough for a HMWV to pass and we spent the next month over watching the locals fixing it so we could once again open it for resupply. The road repairs were completed and a patrol was going to return the LMTV and Jingle trucks to Naray to reload up supplies and return to our camp. After the patrol departed the camp and traveled about four kilometers the TOC received a call that the road had collapsed and the LMTV fell 400 feet down the embankment into the river. The Quick Reaction Force (QRF) platoon was dispatched to help the patrol secure the area with the MEDEVAC helicopter inbound from Jalabad. The platoon on the ground climbed down the cliff to the downed crew. When they arrived at the bottom, they found the vehicle submerged in the water with our executive officer and our senior mechanic was on the bank with a broken back. They tried to resuscitate our executive officer until the MEDEVAC helicopter evacuated them by basket to FOB Naray where our forward surgical team was located. The platoon retrieved all of the sensitive items and destroyed what remained of the truck and returned to camp. We received word a few hours later that our executive officer did not make it and our mechanic was being transported to

Landstuhl for immediate surgery. As a unit, we were devastated to lose another brother to a non-combat injury a few weeks before we were to start our Relief In Place (RIP). We conducted a memorial ceremony and named the Camp in honor of him. We mourned in our own separate ways but had to continue on with the fight and our day to day missions. We conducted all dismounted operations while the road was being repaired and started preparing for our RIP with the 82nd in the first two weeks of February. The 82nd started flying into Camp Keating and I pushed my ADVON to Kuwait to redeploy and set up our rear headquarters. We had just completed the first week of the RIP when we got the news that we were going to be extended for four months. The 82nd packed up their gear and left our camp to reinforce the fight in the south with the coalition forces. I contacted our troops in Kuwait and redirected them back to rejoin with us back in the north.

We received word that our troop was tasked with reconnaissance for another outpost into a remote village of Barga Matal that was located an hour flight Northeast of Camp Keating. The intelligence on the village was that it was a staging point for foreign fighters and multiple high value targets as soon as they came through the mountain passes from Pakistan. The HUMINT had multiple safe houses and massive caches located throughout the village. We prepped for the mission and the satellite photos revealed that winter was still in full effect in Barga Matal. The valley floor was at 7200 feet and covered with a foot of snow all the way up to the 12,000 foot peaks. The only HLZ was 800 meters outside of the village and we would have to transport anything that we captured and transport some of our pertinent equipment. I decided to bring two All Terrain Vehicles (ATV) with us on the insertion to increase the speed on the backside extraction. We

loaded our Soldiers and half a company of ANA on three serials of aircraft and flew into the unchartered valley. The first set of aircraft flew over the village and came into the HLZ fast so it sank the wheels deep into the now thawing field. The ramp dropped on both aircraft and we flew out the back to secure the area and get the 120mm set up for the next two incoming aircraft. We came in fast and took the house that was storing the cache and found three Chinook loads of assorted weapons and ammunitions. We split off a platoon to over watch the suspected safe house as we moved the cache to the HLZ. The weather started to turn for the worse and our extraction birds were delayed for two days so we set up a defense in the compound that we located. The delays gave us time to thoroughly inventory and inspect the seized weapons prior to extracting them to our camp. The inspection by our EOD team found a lot of damaged and unstable equipment that needed to be destroyed there prior to us returning to our camp. The EOD destroyed six different bundles of weapons and damaged ammunition while we waited on the weather to clear. The platoon over watching the suspected safe house did not achieve any positive identification during their recon and we pulled them off of their position a few minutes prior to the aircraft arriving. When the weather finally broke, we loaded the aircraft with the cache and extracted all of our people out of the town for the last time during our tour.

After returning back to our camp, we were within our thirty-day window of redeploying so we started focusing on the upcoming RIP with the 173rd while the platoons conducted their recon and security patrols in their areas. Over the next few weeks we ran joint operations with the 173rd and started redeploying our Soldiers to

Manas to return back to Fort Drum. I continued to remain with the incoming unit a few days after the completion of the RIP in the event of an enemy attack on the new unit. The new unit had only minor contacts with the enemy so I flew out to rejoin the last flight out of Afghanistan with our Squadron. Once arriving back in the states we completed our welcome home ceremony and enjoyed our first four-day weekend in over 17 months of combat operations.

17 months of combat brought our troop through tough terrain, extreme weather, and casualties of our brothers. The heart of this Cavalry ground unit may have been wounded but it continued to beat through it all and I am proud to have been just one of the leaders and members of this phenomenal “Able” troop.